

Ethics in Praxis: Situational, Embodied, Relational

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As the introduction to this issue makes clear, the ethical exposure essays we include here are the start of an ongoing initiative in the journal—to include focused sections of shorter pieces on critical threads or matters of concern in ongoing RHM work, in this case ethical conundra encountered in practice-level enactments of methodologies. In setting the tone for this special section, we now attempt to parse an “ethics in praxis” that is characterized by situational, embodied, and reflexive orientations rather than by attributes more common in virtue ethics. This emphasis on praxis allows us to put forward an idea of ethics in and for RHM that is responsive to critique as we articulate it in the overall introduction to this issue: as kairos-driven and attuned to crises as they unfold in the present and as they anticipate and offer opportunities to “play” at various imagined futures.

Indeed, as rhetoricians of health and medicine increasingly encounter messy questions in field sites, in online settings, involving vulnerable populations, involving co-authorship with stakeholders, when experimenting with research methods from other fields, within interdisciplinary research teams, and so on, we have the opportunity and obligation to critically reflect on, raise questions about, and imagine new possibilities for the ethical dimensions of our research practices. Although national organizations have provided some guidance, the documents are either on broad forms of ethical communication (e.g., NCA’s Credo for Ethical Communication) or on

specific types of research (e.g., Association of Internet Researchers' Ethics statement), prompting Raquel Baldwinson (2018) to argue for RHM scholars to pivot away from professional disciplinary codes of ethics and towards the alternative rhetorical approach to articulating our ethical concerns and questions in health and medicine—a “rhetorical ethics” (p. 228). John Lynch (2020) responded to Baldwinson arguing that a code or even a statement of ethics for rhetoric isn't necessary since scholarship in RHM is inherently ethical. Concerned that calls for an ethics statement could be pandering to the idea that RHM has no intrinsic legitimacy, he states, “rhetorical criticism is thus an ethical criticism: thus, my claim that *the ethics of rhetoric is the rhetoric of ethics*” (p. 256). Baldwinson's call for an ethical statement and Lynch's assertion that one is not needed enter into a critical space that is part of a renaissance of ethical scholarship in rhetoric and writing studies broadly (see for example, De Hertogh, 2018; Duffy & Agnew, 2020; McKinnon et al, 2016; Restaino, 2019).

However, much recent research is focused on virtue ethics. For example, Jared Colton and Steve Homes (2018) argue for *hexis* as a defining term for ethics. That is, they posit “habits” (how they translate the Greek term *hexis*) as forms of virtue that should overlap (p. 130) when approaching ethical situations. Folding human actors in with nonhuman actants, Colton and Holmes' analysis offers examples of habits of, for example, justice, care, patience, and fairness and posit that “seeing ethics through a virtue ethics lens will continue to offer ways to think through normative values without reinscribing fixed rules or without relying on the myth of the autonomous rational subject” (pp. 142–43). This orientation to habit as a way to consider ethics offers some promise—particularly in offering up a way to account for how one might approach a situation that is not always predictable through a preset series of habits. That said, we are compelled to extend their work in ways that complicate temporalities by invoking Gaston Bachelard's (2013/1932) sense that a “habit is a certain order of instances chosen from the basic ensemble of moments in time; it plays itself out at a specific pitch and with a distinct tone” (p. 43). Inflecting “habits” as they relate to ethics via Bachelard compels us to consider the concreteness and complexity of habits as they manifest and accrete over time and through a series of specific instances. In other words, perhaps what recent work on ethics as habits could more fully consider is that habits are a collection of specific instants gathered over time—a consideration that prompts us to start any ethical consideration with “the instant.”

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And that's where we want to start. Our notion of critique as articulated in the introduction to this issue hinges on a kairotic consideration of, among other things, crises. Here we similarly want to focus on the instant, particularly in the midst of research practice, and what it means for scholars to examine ethics *situationally*, but more so, situationally instant by instant. This is a kairos-driven approach since it is in the moment that a problem presents itself that exigent ethical moves often become apparent. Shifting the emphasis away from larger moral or virtuous questions and principles allows reflection on ethical engagements that require greater attention to ethics as they come into being in the present, in the context of an on-the-spot decision related to a specific situation, and the impacts of such decisions on participants and the resulting data/perception that is gained.

This special section advances *RHM*'s commitment to ethical discussions. In particular, the essays in this section expose some of the "behind-the-scenes" ethical quandaries and conundrums encountered and negotiated in our research practices. We use the term "practice" here to emphasize the "actual work and implementation of methods and methodology in the process of performing research" (Melonçon & St. Amant, 2019; see also Scott & Melonçon, 2018; Teston, 2012). Indeed, in *RHM* scholarship, many of the ethical decisions need to be made in practice when something goes wrong or something does not work the way it was intended. The more that *RHM* scholars engage with empirical research and particularly community-based or field research (see for example Bivens, 2018), the more necessary it is to develop an ethical praxis that considers the generative power of a specific situation. That is, *RHM* needs more transparent discussions about the ethical challenges and considerations that become apparent only during the practice of research. Thus, in focusing on the practice of research, we expose the necessity of considering situational ethics in more robust and nuanced ways.

By its definition, situational ethics is intimately tied to the context in which the act or circumstance requires an ethical decision, very often beyond a moral standard. The connection to a specific context bounds it spatially and temporally, while also emphasizing specific characteristics of the situation at hand. The situation is instantaneous. Prescient of our articulation in the introduction to this issue on what is at stake as we continue to carve out space for critique in *RHM* in the context of ongoing and overlapping crises, Bachelard (2013/1932) wrote, "when that shattering instant arrives . . . we immediately feel the hostile novelty of the next instant . . . it is the dramatic

quality that perhaps enables us to sense the reality of the instant” (p. 7). Here, Bachelard insists that the dramatic instant holds potential for a deeper understanding, and such an insight becomes even clearer when placed into conversations of ethics. That is, the instant when things go wrong or when our own understandings are brought into question is also the moment where the most learning can occur. It is within the disruption of this dramatic moment where reasoning is interrupted, and new clarity or ideas can be seen. When thinking of ethics through the idea of the instant, the total force and attention is on the moment where something has deviated away from what one may have expected. The micro-attention of the instant allows situational ethics to take on a new form that is embedded within the context and the temporal reality of when a decision had to be made. Thinking in terms of the instant, scholars and researchers can better isolate and understand the nuances of ethical engagement during the practice of research. Moreover, by sharing such moments and the deep learning that followed them, RHM scholar-researchers create new frameworks of ethics explicitly out of ephemeral research practice which can, then, inform future practices of research—practices that, if researchers are attuned to the possibility, might contain instances that engender more new theories and *techne*.

Moreover, what we noticed in common in these essays, in ongoing discussions in RHM around research, and in our own work, is that the reflective and reflexive practice seen here should help researchers better learn to recognize these potentially generative moments as they happen, or even before they happen. While the authors of the ethical exposure essays are reflecting on past practices, in those instants within their own research where situational ethics took on a new meaning, they came to insights that could impact future researchers’ decisions in their own *kairotic* moments of research practice. We would then argue that to explicate situational ethics in a way to teach a practical orientation, one has to consider the concept of embodied ethics.

What is missing, that is, from the more generic definitions of situational ethics is the necessity to fully account for the embodiment of the situation in the instants on which it relies. In arguing to “bring the body back,” Lisa Melonçon (2018) invited RHM scholars to ensure that they did not forget the material body with all its imperfections and frailties when performing research. She also provided an important definition (of sorts) of embodiment as one that is “relational, contextual, and performative” (p. 99). Considering embodiment as an integral part of ethics allows an emphasis on

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the material body—researcher and /or participant—and the body, of course, relates to the situational context. Research practice as a form of performance reliant on a series of instances enables embodiment to be explicitly embedded within aspects of research—even when scholars only ever implicitly recognize such embodiments.

As we consider ways to explicate situational ethics, we want to highlight the embodied dimensions of ethical practice by calling for a direct definition and consideration that takes Bachelard's notion of the instant into account. Thus, an *embodied ethic* is a necessary component of situational ethics that recognizes and reflects on the role of embodied participants at the instant of research practice.

Shifting to an ethical orientation that emphasizes embodiment also means that we are emphasizing the people that are always part of research practice. The consequences of embodied ethics are that scholars move beyond administrative or institutional ethics (for example, the institutional review board), which is often more concerned with issues of liability rather than the actual ethical consequences of embodied humans involved in research. It also moves beyond virtues of right and wrong. Instead, embodied ethics starts at the consequence of research practice on bodies and with bodies. Embodied ethics also uncovers in material, humanistic ways how our representations of research came to be and the consequences of this. Following Bachelard (1957), an embodied ethical orientation insists that “human interests should thus be attached to all objects so that those objects can recover their primal function and words their fullest meaning” (p. 273). In other words, an ethics in praxis for RHM might ask: What is at stake when bodies become key components of the research practice? One answer comes from an understanding of relations.

We turn here to the idea of *relational* because we also want to highlight the connections—the relationships—between participants, researchers, and the all other elements of the situation (material, cultural, economic, etc.). A focus on the relational “help[s] remind us that a relationship is not a discrete, state entity but rather a process of the interaction of forces” (Condit, 2010, p. 6). The relational forces play a vital role in research practice and should something go awry, relational aspects should become a key part of the reflexive process in determining an ethical way forward. As Jane Bennett (2010) has argued, ethical responsibility lies in part on the reaction to and relationship of different actors and actants within a situation (p. 37). The relational aspect of ethical praxis then guides a consideration of all the

forces and actions within a situation and between all of the bodies. Relationality, then, is the literal and figurative connection of an ethical praxis born in an instant.

When an ethical conundrum arises during research practice, the researcher should understand that “an intuition is experienced not proven” (Bachelard, 2013/1932, p. 4), and it is the intuition that drives the action toward ethical praxis. Moreover, researchers would do well to remember that “what should guide our research choices is not simply an expectation of internal coherence, but a self-conscious reflection as to their consequences as well” (Debs, 1993, p. 252). The consequence of following our intuition is an ethic; it opens up a space, during the instant, to attend and to consider the consequence of approaching the situation differently. Bachelard’s idea of the disruption, in this way, aptly summarizes situational; an embodied and relational ethic is described because it is in the singular moment when attention is focused so intently that the imagination can create alternative paths. Or in light of research, that an ethical praxis can be realized. The experience of dramatic instants is the only way we can consider different ways of knowing, different ways of doing, and different ways of enacting ethics.

What these essays in the special section demonstrate collectively are instants of disruptions in research practice, and more so, they demonstrate the need for an expansion of ethical scholarship and practice that considers in more sophisticated ways ethical dimensions *in the instant*. They also contribute to understanding ethical praxis as situational, embodied, and relational. We encourage scholars in RHM to take these ideas to expand, to build, to counter, and to consider because ethical praxis and ethics more broadly will remain key considerations for RHM scholarship.

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